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V

'V' Series: 14 Poets - Loss & Longing
Edited By: Jordannah Elizabeth Graham-Mayer

Dedicated to Jaaliyah

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INTRODUCTION

February 9, 2026

This collection began with a feeling rather than a thesis.

Loss and longing are not opposite states; they are braided. Longing is what remains when love has nowhere to land, when presence becomes memory, when the body remembers before the mind can make sense of what is gone. These poems trace that braid across time, across bodies, across faith, language, and music. They ask what it means to desire what is absent—and how we learn to live inside that absence.

The poets gathered here do not resolve longing. They do not promise relief. Millay tells us time lies. Dunbar imagines a world made bearable only by another's nearness. Rilke urges us not away from longing but *into* it, to the edge where beauty and terror are indistinguishable. Again and again, love appears not as a cure, but as a condition—one that sharpens attention, intensifies memory, and exposes the vulnerability of being human.

This collection moves between the spiritual and the sensual, the ecstatic and the ordinary. Bodies are not separate from belief here; they are its language. Mayer's frank chronicle of intimacy sits beside Donne's metaphysical union of souls. Cohen and Blake give voice to modern estrangement, where love dissolves under distance, distraction, and doubt. Plath, Jordan, Browne, Elhillo—each insists that love is not abstract, but lived: in breath, in chance encounters, in the weight of a sleeping body, in the quiet miracle of someone still being there.

What emerges is not a single definition of longing, but a shared recognition of it. These poems speak to one another across centuries, reminding us that to love is to risk loss, and that to lose is not to stop loving. Longing endures because it is proof of connection—because something mattered enough to leave an imprint.

This collection is an offering to that space: where desire persists, where grief does not cancel devotion, where absence continues to speak. It is for anyone who has loved and found themselves changed by it—and for anyone still learning how to live with what remains.

— Jordannah Elizabeth Graham-Mayer

Longing

Paul Laurence Dunbar

If you could sit with me beside the sea to-day,
And whisper with me sweetest dreamings o'er and o'er;
I think I should not find the clouds so dim and gray,
And not so loud the waves complaining at the shore.

If you could sit with me upon the shore to-day,
And hold my hand in yours as in the days of old,
I think I should not mind the chill baptismal spray,
Nor find my hand and heart and all the world so cold.

If you could walk with me upon the strand to-day,
And tell me that my longing love had won your own,
I think all my sad thoughts would then be put away,
And I could give back laughter for the Ocean's moan!

From The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913) by Paul Laurence Dunbar. This poem is in the public domain.

Go to the Limits of Your Longing

Rainer Maria Rilke
Translated and read by Joanna Macy

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Book of Hours, I 59

3.

Longing
Mia Couto
Translated from the Portuguese by Joana Araújo & Zack Rogow

It hurts me this longing
for the shock of bodies
wounding each other with tenderness
it pains me that distant memory
of your dress

falling at our feet
It hurts me the longing
for that time when I inhabited you

like salt infusing the sea
like light contracting
the surprised pupils of the eyes

When will I be your shadow again, your desire
your relentless nights
your persistence, your need
I
am weak
without you
I
was water, vegetal sap

Now I'm a trembling droplet, an exposed root
My love
bring again
the clarity of water
put my vagabond tenderness back to work
dive your fingers
into the spell of my chest
and chase from my deepest cave
the beasts that torment my sleep

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4.

Longing
Matthew Arnold

Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again!
For so the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.

Come, as thou cam'st a thousand times,
A messenger from radiant climes,
And smile on thy new world, and be
As kind to others as to me!

Or, as thou never cam'st in sooth,
Come now, and let me dream it truth,
And part my hair, and kiss my brow,
And say, My love why sufferest thou?

Come to me in my dreams, and then
By day I shall be well again!
For so the night will more than pay
The hopeless longing of the day.

Arnold, Matthew. "Longing." Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems, 1852.

5.

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year's bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide.
There are a hundred places where I fear
To go,—so with his memory they brim.
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering him.

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Source: Twentieth-Century American Poetry (2004)

6.

A Memory of Us
Safia Elhillo

when i think of us i think of the lakewater
near longtown, what might not technically
constitute a lake but i prefer that word for
the open mouth of its vowel, how it called
us to its throat & held us there, in the sun,
the high points of our faces slick with light
& its arc around our shoulders, the soft
gathering of flesh around our knees,
the lone chair we found near the shore
where we took turns posing, jutting out
an eloquent hip, cackling in the bright language
of flowers for whom i downloaded an app
& learned their names: beautyberry, yarrow,
cornus florida, black-eyed susan, & you,
& you, my bright hibiscus, my every color

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Source: World Literature Today, July 12 2020 (World Literature Today, 2020)

7.

First turn to me. . . .
Bernadette Mayer

First turn to me after a shower,
you come inside me sideways as always

in the morning you ask me to be on top of you,
then we take a nap, we're late for school

you arrive at night inspired and drunk,
there is no reason for our clothes

we take a bath and lie down facing each other,
then later we turn over, finally you come

we face each other and talk about childhood
as soon as I touch your penis I wind up coming

you stop by in the morning to say hello
we sit on the bed indian fashion not touching

in the middle of the night you come home
from a nightclub, we don't get past the bureau

next day it's the table, and after that the chair
because I want so much to sit you down & suck your cock

you ask me to hold your wrists, but then when I
touch your neck with both my hands you come

it's early morning and you decide to very quietly
come on my knee because of the children

you've been away at school for centuries, your girlfriend
has left you, you come four times before morning

you tell me you masturbated in the hotel before you came by
I don't believe it, I serve the lentil soup naked

I massage your feet to seduce you, you are reluctant,
my feet wind up at your neck and ankles

you try not to come too quickly
also, you dont want to have a baby

I stand up from the bath, you say turn around
and kiss the backs of my legs and my ass

you suck my cunt for a thousand years, you are weary
at last I remember my father's anger and I come

you have no patience and come right away
I get revenge and won't let you sleep all night

we make out for so long we can't remember how
we wound up hitting our heads against the wall

I lie on my stomach, you put one hand under me
and one hand over me and that way can love me

you appear without notice and with flowers
I fall for it and we become missionaries

you say you can only fuck me up the ass when you are drunk
so we try it sober in a room at the farm

we lie together one night, exhausted couplets
and don't make love. does this mean we've had enough?

watching t.v. we wonder if each other wants to

interrupt the plot; later I beg you to read to me

like the Chinese we count 81 thrusts
then 9 more out loud till we both come

I come three times before you do
and then it seems you're mad and never will

it's only fair for a woman to come more
think of all the times they didn't care

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Source: A Bernadette Mayer Reader (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1992)

8.

Altruism
Molly Peacock

What if we got outside ourselves and there
really was an outside out there, not just
our insides turned inside out? What if there
really were a you beyond me, not just
the waves off my own fire, like those waves off
the backyard grill you can see the next yard through,
though not well -- just enough to know that off
to the right belongs to someone else, not you.
What if, when we said I love you, there were
a you to love as there is a yard beyond
to walk past the grill and get to? To endure
the endless walk through the self, knowing through a bond
that has no basis (for ourselves are all we know)
is altruism: not giving, but coming to know
someone is there through the wavy vision
of the self's heat, love become a decision.

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9.

Death Of Love
James Blake

I don't know how we got here
I think we might be sleeping
I think we might be walking
To the death of love (To the...)
It never seemed so hard
To say what you really mean
When everything you have seen is from above (From above)
It's the death of love (Death of love, if we're on an island all the time)

If we're on an island all the time
And it's yours and it is mine
It's the death of love (It's the death of love)

Is there no good faith?
Is our love misplaced?

I don't know how we got here
But everything feels different
People are losing interest
In the best of love
It never seemed so hard
To wake up from your dream

When everything you have seen is from above (From above)
It's the death of love
Death of love

If we're on an island all the time
And it's yours and it is mine
It's the death of love

Don't leave me behind
Over one bad hour
Sometimes we come back empty handed
Like bees from plastic flowers
We can't follow you where you're going
We can't follow you where you're going
We can't follow you where you're planning to go
To the death of love
I think we might be sleeping
I think we might be walking
To the...
To the death of love

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10.

You Want It Darker
Words by Leonard Cohen, music by Patrick Leonard

If you are the dealer

I am out of the game
If you are the healer
I'm broken and lame
If thine is the glory
Then mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame

Magnified and sanctified
Be Thy Holy Name
Vilified and crucified
In the human frame
A million candles burning
For the help that never came

You want it darker
We kill the flame

Hineni Hineni
I'm ready, my Lord

There's a lover in the story
But the story is still the same
There's a lullaby for suffering
And a paradox to blame
But it's written in the scriptures
And it's not some idle claim
You want it darker
We kill the flame

They're lining up the prisoners
The guards are taking aim
I struggled with some demons
They were middle-class and tame
Didn't know I had permission
To murder and to maim
You want it darker
We kill the flame

Hineni Hineni
I'm ready, my Lord

Magnified and sanctified
Be Thy Holy Name

Vilified and crucified
In the human frame
A million candles burning
For the love that never came
You want it darker
We kill the flame

If you are the dealer
I'm out of the game
If you are the healer
I'm broken and lame
If thine is the glory
Then mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame

Hineni Hineni
I'm ready, my Lord

Lyrics: Leonard Cohen
Music/Composition: Patrick Leonard
Artist/Performer: Leonard Cohen
Producers: Adam Cohen and Patrick Leonard
Label: Columbia Records
Released: September 21, 2016 (single) / October 21, 2016 (album) This reflects the official credits: Cohen as lyricist, Leonard as composer, and Cohen's own performance on the recording.

You're
Sylvia Plath

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do.
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, my little loaf.

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.

First published in 1961 and collected in Ariel in 1965. Reprinted in The Collected Poems, 1981.

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Source: Collected Poems (HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 1992)

12.

Chance Meeting
Susan Browne

I know him, that man
walking- toward me up the crowded street
of the city, I have lived with him
seven years now, I know his fast stride,
his windy wheatfield hair, his hands thrust
deep in his jacket pockets, hands
that have known my body, touched
its softest part, caused its quick shudders
and slow releasings, I have seen his face
above my face, his mouth smiling, moaning
his eyes closed and opened, I have studied
his eyes, the brown turning gold at the centers,
I have silently watched him lying beside me
in the early morning, I know his loneliness,
like mine, human and sad,
but different, too, his private pain
and pleasure I can never enter even as he comes
closer, past trees and cars, trash and flowers,
steam rising from the manhole covers,
gutters running with rain, he lifts his head,
he sees me, we are strangers again,

and a rending music of desire and loss—

I don't know him—courses through me,
and we kiss and say, It's good to see you,

as if we haven't seen each other in years
when it was just a few hours ago,
and we are shy, then, not knowing
what to say next.

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13.

Poem for My Love
June Jordan

How do we come to be here next to each other
in the night
Where are the stars that show us to our love
inevitable
Outside the leaves flame usual in darkness
and the rain
falls cool and blessed on the holy flesh
the black men waiting on the corner for
a womanly mirage
I am amazed by peace
It is this possibility of you
asleep
and breathing in the quiet air

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Source: Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan (2005)

The Ecstasy
John Donne

Where, like a pillow on a bed
A pregnant bank swell'd up to rest

The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best.
Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;
So to'intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.
As 'twixt two equal armies fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.
If any, so by love refin'd
That he soul's language understood,
And by good love were grown all mind,
Within convenient distance stood,
He (though he knew not which soul spake,
Because both meant, both spake the same)
Might thence a new concoction take

And part far purer than he came.
This ecstasy doth unperplex,
We said, and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex,
We see we saw not what did move;
But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mix'd souls doth mix again
And makes both one, each this and that.
A single violet transplant,
The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poor and scant)
Redoubles still, and multiplies.
When love with one another so
Interinanimates two souls.
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.
We then, who are this new soul, know
Of what we are compos'd and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
Are souls, whom no change can invade.
But oh alas, so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They'are ours, though they'are not we; we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.
We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their senses' force to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.
On man heaven's influence works not so,
But that it first imprints the air;
So soul into the soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair.
As our blood labors to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtle knot which makes us man,
So must pure lovers' souls descend

T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.
To'our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.
And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we'are to bodies gone.

In "The Ecstasy," the great Metaphysical poet John Donne (1572–1631) explores the transcendent power of love and the relationship between the body and the soul.

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Happy V-Day

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